North Fork of the Big Hole
Riparian Fence Project
Environmental Assessment Decision Notice

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region Three, Bozeman
August 2009

Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to provide funding for and implement a project to construct approximately 46,000 feet of 3-strand electric riparian fence, 5,800 feet of 3-strand electric pasture fence, and 3,900 feet of barbwire pasture fence along a 4.5 mile stretch of the North Fork of the Big Hole River. The intent of this project is to enhance the native riparian vegetation that will stabilize banks, provide cover, benefit stream function, and enhance fish and wildlife habitat. Installation of the riparian and pasture fence will create a multiple pasture rotational grazing system which in time will improve riparian vegetation to benefit fish and wildlife species. This project will specifically improve habitat for fluvial (river dwelling) Arctic grayling, a species of special concern, as well as numerous other fish and wildlife species within this reach of the North Fork.

The project site is located on property owned by John and Phyllis Erb (T1S, R15W, Sections 31, 32, 33 and T2S, R15, Section 5) and a State Trust parcel managed by Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). The State Trust Parcel is located at T1S-R16W, Section 36. The Project is located approximately 6 miles west of the community of Wisdom in Beaverhead County.

Montana Environmental Policy Act

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on August 7, 2009.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 14 days (through August 21, 2009). The EA was mailed to over 35 individuals and groups, and legal notices were printed in the *Montana Standard* (Butte, MT) and the *Dillon Tribune*. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: http://fwp.mt.gov//publicnotices/.

Summary of Public Comment

One public comment was received during the 14-day review period. The comment, received from the Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF), with MFWP responses to specific issues is as follows:

On behalf of Montana Wildlife Federation, Montana's oldest and largest, in-state organization of hunters, anglers, and outdoor recreationists with more than 7,500 members and 23 affiliated sportsmen's clubs, we offer the following comments on the EA on the Riparian Fence Project on the North Fork of the Big Hole River. MWF agrees with the apparent intent of this project but we must however, note several significant considerations related to the document.

1. A two-week period for public comment on an EA is inadequate. Please adhere to a minimum of 30 days for comment in all future EAs.

   FWP Response: The intent of this project is to enhance the native riparian vegetation that will stabilize banks, provide cover, benefit stream function, and enhance habitat that will benefit Arctic grayling and numerous other species. Because the timeliness of the opportunity and benefits associated with improving habitat on this reach of the North Fork which are substantial and viewed as having few or no negative impacts, MFWP anticipated no significant negative public sentiment for this project and thus was comfortable with a shorter 14-day comment period.

2. Information on which to base and evaluate the project's merits should be expanded upon in order to fully comprehend the scope of the project. For example the grazing plan which appears to be the center of any anticipated riparian improvement is not yet prepared and thus unavailable for public review; surely a project design can't be "90% complete" without a comprehensive grazing plan?

   FWP Response: The private landowner involved in this project is enrolled in the Big Hole Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances Program (CCAA). As part of the CCAA efforts, Riparian Assessments (NRCS Protocol) are completed on all stream reaches on enrolled landowner's property. Based on the current condition of the riparian corridor (Not sustainable, At Risk, or Sustainable), a management plan is developed by the cooperating agencies and the landowner with the goal of reaching sustainable conditions in 15 years. Every 5 years, the riparian assessments are repeated and if improvement is not seen towards sustainable conditions, the management plan will be changed. The riparian and pasture fences that are proposed in this project will create five pastures and allow the landowner to implement a rotational grazing system that will allow a period of recovery for each pasture resulting in improved riparian conditions. The specifics of the grazing management plan are currently being developed by MFWP and the landowner. The final grazing management plan will be included in the landowner's CCAA site-specific management plan. This plan will be monitored by FWP, and if there is not a positive response to riparian conditions, FWP and the landowners will review the plan and make changes.

3. No data on current fish species inhabiting the project area are presented. Will brook trout be the major beneficiaries of this habitat improvement? MWF believes that some analysis is merited since Eastern Brook trout are known to compete with native species for food and suitable habitat.

FWP Response: MFWP completes electrofishing surveys in this reach of the North Fork to assess species composition, abundance, distribution, and demographics. Arctic grayling are present in low numbers in this reach, but abundance has declined since surveys began in the 1980s. The ultimate goal of the project is to improve instream habitat for Arctic grayling. This improvement will most likely benefit numerous other native and sportfish species that include eastern brook trout, mountain whitefish, mottled sculpin, longnose dace, longnose suckers, common suckers, and brown trout. While the project may provide benefits for both native and non-native species, MFWP believes that without improving habitat, Arctic grayling abundance and distribution will remain at depleted levels far below carrying capacity.

In the early 1990s, MFWP conducted investigations to assess potential mechanisms of competition between Arctic grayling and eastern brook trout. The study provided evidence of habitat segregation between adult grayling and brook trout. Specifically, each species preferred specific microhabitats (current velocities, cover, focal positions) that reduced competition for feeding and resting habitats. In addition, there are numerous tributaries in the Big Hole drainage where habitat remains in good condition and eastern brook trout and Arctic grayling have coexisted for many years. MFWP believes improving habitat for the grayling population is critical to the persistence of the species in the Big Hole Drainage.

4. There are no data nor description available concerning stream characteristics either at present or anticipated as a benefit of the project except for a brief/cursory description found in "No Action" Alternative.

FWP Response: MFWP is currently completing a two-year assessment of stream and habitat conditions on this reach of the North Fork. The assessment includes collecting baseline data on habitat quality, channel characteristics, vegetation composition, sediment composition and transport, discharge and irrigation use, and stream temperature regimes. This data will be used to design projects that best address habitat needs of Arctic grayling. The proposed riparian fence project will initiate the first phase of restoration by improving the riparian community and is part of the larger effort to enhance habitats on the North fork of the Big Hole River.

5. For an $80,000 cost, what are the benefits for the angling public? There is no mention of public access discussions despite our repeated requests for inclusion of this topic in all fisheries related EAs. MWF is aware that public access may not be a requirement for funding but are also not aware of anything specific which precludes its discussion in the descriptive of the project's benefit to the public.

FWP Response: This project will improve the riparian corridor which is home to many fish and wildlife species. Improvements to habitat will result in improved population abundance and distribution for these species that will benefit anglers, hunters, and recreationists. The involved landowner allows access with permission. The project also includes a section of state trust land that is open for public access.

6. Despite the noted discrepancies, we applaud efforts to improve the status of fluvial grayling. We believe fully that riparian fencing is a key component to habitat improvement. We support this proposal but must state our hope that future documents of this nature will comprehensively present the information required for a thorough evaluation by the public.

   FWP Response: FWP will continue to work with landowners and develop projects that benefit fish and wildlife species as well as the diverse publics that utilize these resources.

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Final Environmental Assessment

There are no modifications necessary to the Draft Environmental Assessment based on public comment. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and the need to preserve fluvial Arctic grayling and its habitat in the North Fork of the Big Hole River, it is my decision to proceed with the Riparian Fence Project to enhance riparian and stream habitats on the proposed reach of the North Fork of the Big Hole River.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

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Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor